

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

C O N F I D E N T I A L VATICAN 005666

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR EUR/WE LEVIN; NEA/RA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/18/2013

TAGS: IZ PHUM PREL VT

SUBJECT: CARDINAL'S IRAQ COMMENTS CREATE DUST-UP

REF: A. VATICAN 5643

1B. VATICAN 5321

Classified By: Amb. Jim Nicholson for reasons 1.5 (b) and (d).

Summary

11. (C) During the presentation of the Pope's World Day of Peace message December 17 (ref a), Cardinal Renato Martino, President of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, caused a stir with comments critical of U.S. treatment of Saddam Hussein following his capture. Media gave wide attention to Martino's assertion that he felt "compassion" for Saddam and that the U.S. had treated him "like a cow" by filming and displaying his medical examination. Many media mistakenly suggested that this first public reaction to the arrest of Saddam by a Vatican official reflected an official Vatican view. The Ambassador registered U.S. concern with Martino's characterization with Vatican Foreign Minister Lajolo, and in writing to Secretary of State Sodano. A number of senior officials, including former FM Tauran, have conveyed their displeasure with Martino's comments to the Ambassador. Martino was outspoken in his opposition to the Iraq war, and had to be reigned in earlier this year. Embassy has urged the Holy See to clarify its official view to repair the public impression generated by Martino's ill-advised comments. End Summary.

Martino Sounds Off

12. (C) During the presentation of the Pope's World Day of Peace message December 17 (ref a), Cardinal Renato Martino, President of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, whose responsibility it is to present the annual message to the media, caused a stir with several off the cuff comments critical of U.S. actions connected to the arrest of Saddam. Martino, the former Holy See Permanent Observer at the UN in New York, had been outspoken in his criticism of U.S. policy in the run-up to the Iraq war, often diverging from the more moderate and nuanced views of the Pope. Though at that time a private rebuke from then Foreign Minister Tauran may have quieted Martino, yesterday's occasion presented the opportunity for him to grab some headlines again, offering the first substantial reaction by a Vatican official to the capture and detention of Saddam.

"Treated like a Cow"

13. (SBU) While Martino allowed that the Holy See "hopes this capture . . . may contribute to the pacification and democratization of Iraq," he also voiced displeasure at the broadcast of TV images showing a bedraggled Saddam undergoing a medical examination shortly after his detention. "What caused me pain was seeing this ruined man, treated like a cow whose teeth are being examined. They could have spared us those pictures," he said. "I felt compassion for him." Martino described Saddam as "a man of tragedy," with heavy responsibilities for the crimes he committed. Martino added several negative comments on the war, saying that "it would be illusory to think that (the capture of Saddam would) repair the damage caused by that great defeat for humanity which war always represents." In remarks more reflective of the Holy See's general outlook on events, the Cardinal added that the Vatican wanted Saddam to receive a fair trial for alleged crimes during his long dictatorship. He said that, as in other cases, the Vatican is opposed to the death penalty in this instance.

Media Picks up Martino's Rant

14. (SBU) Martino's comments trumped the release of the World Peace Day message -- certainly not good form to upstage a Papal message -- and received prominent play in the media. Most media, rather than highlighting the Pope's message calling for an international effort to update international legal mechanisms to deal with problems posed by terrorism,

highlighted the Vatican "rebuke" to the U.S. and its "compassion" for Saddam. The Vatican's official newspaper, while highlighting the attacks that followed the arrest, also said that the dictator's detention widened the prospects for an era of peace, justice and normal life in Iraq. The Italian Bishops' Conference daily Avvenire's front-page headline, "Safer with Saddam in Shackles," reflected the now

oft-encountered realistic position on Iraq (ref b) of the Pope's Vicar for Rome, Cardinal Camillo Ruini. (Note: As resident of the Italian Bishops Conference, Ruini is responsible for the editorial tone of Avvenire. End note.)

Ambassador Registers Complaint with Vatican MFA

15. (C) Following Martino's outburst, the Ambassador met with Holy See Foreign Minister equivalent Giovanni Lajolo December 17 to register U.S. displeasure with Martino's comments. The Ambassador said the characterization of poor treatment of Saddam was simply untrue, and the Cardinal's statements had served both to obscure the Pope's World Peace Day message and to confuse the U.S. government and public about who was speaking for the Vatican. He noted that media had widely reported the remarks as Vatican comments, and showed Lajolo a copy of a New York Times article reprinted in the International Herald Tribune.

16. (C) Lajolo was deferential, but surprisingly unmoved by the Ambassador's concerns. He described Martino's comments as personal views, adding that it was the media's job -- and that of the U.S. Embassy -- to be sure the public and USG were aware of the distinction between a personal statement and an official statement from the Holy See. He was not receptive to the Ambassador's suggestion that the Vatican ought to release an official statement on Saddam's capture, in order to be clear who was speaking for the Vatican, and resolve any confusion on the Holy See's position. Lajolo said the better idea was to "let the matter drop" and not continue the controversy. He went on to say that he agreed that the images of Saddam should not have been broadcast as they had been. According to Lajolo, the U.S. had not treated Saddam "as a person and as a former head of state" should be treated, his previous crimes notwithstanding. (Note: The Vatican made similar protests when captured troops, and bodies of slain U.S. soldiers were displayed by Iraqis during the war. End note).

Fallout May Continue

17. (C) In conversations with Vatican contacts December 17, the Ambassador learned that there was substantial dissatisfaction with Martino's remarks within the Curia. Many disagreed sharply with the content of the comments, and also questioned the appropriateness of Martino's airing them to the media -- and stealing the limelight from the Pope's World Peace Day message. We also learned that Martino's Justice and Peace Council has been receiving numerous faxes and e-mails complaining about the Cardinal's statement. Former Foreign Minister Tauran (protect), who since the Iraq War has stepped into a less visible position but still has pull in the Vatican, told the Ambassador he was incensed with Martino's display, and surprised at Lajolo's reaction to the affair. The Ambassador has communicated with Secretary of State Sodano on the matter (text of letter faxed to EUR/WE) and plans to see him in person next week.

Comment: What's Going on Here?

18. (C) Cardinal Martino, long a thorn in the U.S. side on war and peace issues (though a staunch ally in educating the public on genetically modified food), has likely been aching to get his two cents in on U.S. policy in Iraq since he was silenced in the run-up to the Iraq war. Having been created a Cardinal in the meantime, and now presented with an opportunity to comment on the issue before the media, he could not resist. A contact who works with Martino told us that he thought Martino was also smarting from having his draft of the Peace Day Message turned back by the Secretariat of State as too inflammatory (ref a). Faced with media questions as to why the message had been changed, he may have been trying to save face, while getting some media play.

19. (C) Despite the perception of the Vatican bureaucracy as high on authority and discipline -- which is generally the case on religious issues -- the reality is quite different when it comes to political matters. With regard to the latter, many Cardinals feel free to air their personal views and rarely face reprimand. In this instance, the free-lancing has created a damaging public impression that some would like to see corrected. While fellow Vatican

officials are loathe to criticize one of their own, it is clear that many within the Curia find such ill-considered statements to be a hindrance in promoting the Holy See's international goals. We will continue to press this point with the Holy See in the hopes that Martino and others will seek a "Nihil Obstat" before opening their mouths on such sensitive issues in the future.

10. (U) Minimize considered.

NICHOLSON

NNNN

2003VATICA05666 - Classification: CONFIDENTIAL